World Health Day 2021: Inequalities in mental health is a systemic issue and should be addressed at its core

World Health Day 2021 focuses on the urgent need to build a fairer and healthier world. On this day, Mental Health Europe calls for better mental health promotion, prevention, and services. At the same time, we urge the EU and member states to recognise and address the fundamental flaws preventing Europe from achieving an equitable healthcare system: one where vulnerable groups, including those with psychosocial disabilities, can access care tailored to their needs. These persisting challenges must be addressed more than ever while the pandemic continues to leave its marks on each of us.

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19

For more than a year, COVID-19 has affected Europe and beyond but has disproportionately affected those in already vulnerable situations, including people with psychosocial disabilities. The right to health and access to healthcare is a basic human right; nevertheless, COVID-19 has laid bare the existing inequalities. This unprecedented time has emphasised the urgency of accessible, adequate, and affordable mental health care, as well as the need for such care to be deemed as important and interconnected with physical health.

Disparities in the healthcare system is a systemic issue

Ethnic minorities, women and girls, people with disabilities, LGBTI, undocumented people and those with difficult socio-economic realities are just a few examples of groups that are more likely to bear unequal burden of morbidity and mortality. From lack of information to inaccessible standards of mental health support, discrimination is upheld and maintained at a structural level, preventing vulnerable groups from receiving adequate care.

Mental health problems have been further exacerbated, with more people being likely to experience mental health distress for a plethora of reasons: from the deterioration of social networks to the lack of community support systems, especially for people living in institutions. Without applying an intersectional approach to confronting such barriers, it is not possible to build a more equal and equitable healthcare system. This includes achieving a European shift towards a psychosocial approach to mental health rather than biomedical.

Inadequate access to mental health care

This pandemic has also unmasked the substantial disparities in access to mental health care. People with psychosocial disabilities commonly have a hard time accessing adequate support services, further worsened by the pandemic. To achieve an equitable approach to mental healthcare, information must be accessible for vulnerable persons, including those with psychosocial disabilities. This is imperative considering the continued fast-paced and unexpected updates on the virus and restrictive measures. Support provided must also respect the will and interests of individuals all times, be within reach, and flexible to their needs.

Lack of trust within communities towards mental health care can be attributed to wider issues in accessing support. Some examples include poor patient experiences, negative perception of and social stigma around mental health, financial factors, language barriers, and worry of being subject to coercive treatment. Distrust towards formal healthcare provisions within the communities results in marginalised groups being less likely to seek help or be signposted to services. This could have wider repercussions on society at large, with more people seeking support elsewhere, including additional burden placed on friends, family, and carers. Delays in early intervention can prompt increased cases of preventable yet serious mental and wider health outcomes.

Looking ahead: Early intervention but with a long-term approach

The COVID-19 pandemic taught the importance to intervene early to provide the necessary frameworks to support the most marginalised, including people with psychosocial disabilities. Everyone has mental health and has the potential to develop mental ill-health. Proactive responses will prevent healthcare systems from being further overburdened and collapsing.

Without urgent action around mental health care, the rise of psychosocial support demands will inevitably upsurge, contributing to an increase in the 84 million with mental ill-health across the European Union alone. Moreover, the pandemic will continue to have an immense but unequal toll, and vulnerable groups, including people with psychosocial disabilities, will pay the highest price. Organisations, (ex)users of mental health services, persons with psychosocial disabilities, their families and carers, should be at the forefront of shaping such policies and services. We cannot wait for another pandemic to apply the lessons learned from the current one.

Key recommendations

To prioritise individuals facing mental health difficulties during and after the COVID-19 period, Mental Health Europe calls on European, national and local authorities to:

1. Monitor health inequities and ensure that all individuals are able to access information and quality health services when and where they need them. More research and action-driven by disaggregated data is needed to provide consideration for intersecting factors that may place certain groups in the high-risk category;
2. Move towards human rights compliant and equitable mental health care. Holistic approaches to support services should be developed alongside affected communities, including people with psychosocial disabilities, through meaningful consultations;
3. More investment in activities on increasing mental health literacy, including for all public officials. Increased focus on resolving the mismanagement of the pandemic by bridging the gap in trust between individuals, communities, and mental health services through NGO and community-led initiatives, policies and effective implementation, and tackling issues such as vaccine disinformation; and
4. Urgently adopt comprehensive long-term strategies to mitigate the health and socio-economic consequences of the current crisis on people with psychosocial disabilities.

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About Mental Health Europe

Mental Health Europe (MHE) is the largest European non-governmental network organisation committed to the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing. We advocate for the improvement of care, social inclusion and the protection of the rights of (ex)users of mental health services, persons with psychosocial disabilities, their families and carers. We raise awareness to end mental health stigma and discrimination.

Learn more about MHE from this video. Follow Mental Health Europe on social media. We are on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram.

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